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National Institute on
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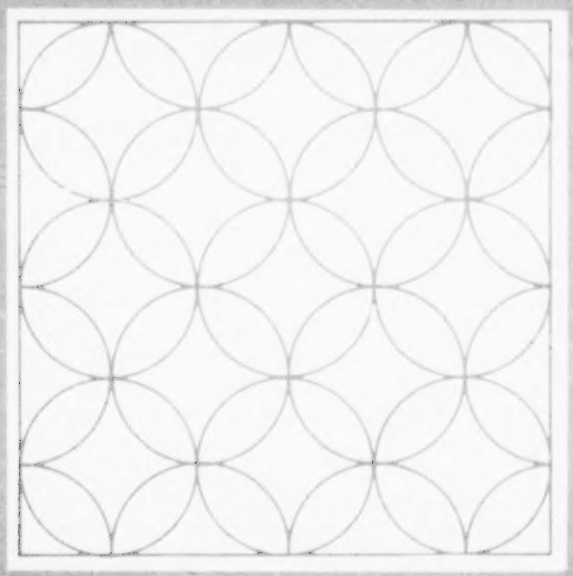
Here's to Your Health

Alcohol Facts for Women



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Public Health Service
Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration

HE 20.8302:

Did you know:

- That alcohol will sometimes affect you differently than it does a man?
- That if you drink while you are pregnant, you might harm your unborn baby?
- That if you mix alcohol with another drug—even a simple cold medication—you may wish you hadn't?
- That when it comes to drinking, your children are likely to imitate what you do—not what you say?

Women's drinking patterns are changing. Forty years ago, most women did not drink at all, but today more than 60 percent of adult American women and nearly 90 percent of college-age women drink. Although women are drinking more and in more settings than in the past, most women who drink alcohol do so without harm. But to live wisely and well, women need to understand their bodies and themselves. And, part of this understanding involves alcohol and how this drug affects a woman's physical, social, and emotional health.

Of course, whether, when, and how you drink is a personal decision. To make the safest choices concerning alcohol use, a woman needs to be informed; she needs to have the facts. The following information answers questions women often ask about alcohol.

KNOWING THE FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL AND YOUR BODY

How much is too much?

Alcohol is so widely and commonly used that we often forget a very important fact—it is a powerful drug that should be handled with care. In small amounts (no more than one or two drinks), most people find alcohol fairly harmless. They say it makes them feel more relaxed and sociable. However, like excessive use of any drug, too much drinking is dangerous to your health, safety, and emotional well-being. Large amounts of alcohol can interfere with your judgment, making you more prone to accidents, can increase feelings of depression and anxiety, and can damage your health.

Moreover, the body's reaction to alcohol varies with the individual. You react differently from your friends, and even your own reactions will vary from day to day. If you are tired, tense, in poor health, or haven't eaten recently, even one drink can hit you very hard. To avoid negative reactions to alcohol, the best rule of thumb is to drink only in relaxed circumstances when you are rested, feeling well, and have had something to eat.

To slow the effect of alcohol, sip your drink slowly and try to space your drinks. Diluting drinks with nonalcoholic, noncarbonated beverages, such as water or juice, also helps. If a drink is having more effect than usual, your body is telling you that it has had enough.

What else influences your reaction to alcohol?

Your weight is a very important factor in how long it takes for your body to metabolize or "burn up" alcohol. The less you weigh, the longer it takes for your body to be clear of alcohol. So, for example, if you weigh 160 pounds, it takes about 2 hours for your system to clear itself of the alcohol in one drink. But if you weigh only 100 pounds, it takes a little longer than 3 hours. And you may be surprised to learn that a 120-pound person would need more than half a day—about 15½ hours—to burn up all the alcohol in a six pack of beer.

HOURS TO METABOLIZE DRINKS

Drinks*	Weight:			
	100 lbs	120 lbs	140 lbs	160 lbs
1	3.1	2.6	2.2	1.9
2	6.2	5.2	4.5	3.9
3	9.3	7.8	6.7	5.8
4	12.4	10.4	9.0	7.8
5	15.6	13.0	11.1	9.8
6	18.6	15.6	13.5	11.7

*Drink: 1½ oz 86 proof liquor or 5 oz 12% wine or 12 oz 4.5% beer

Since the body burns up alcohol at a fairly steady rate, more drinks simply increase the time it takes for the body to be cleared of the alcohol. Hot coffee, fresh air, and cold showers cannot speed up the process; these just make you *feel* more wide awake.

Does alcohol affect men and women differently?

Recent research suggests that women may become more intoxicated than men on the same amount of alcohol, even when body weights are the same. One explanation for this is that a woman generally has less body fluid and more body fat than does a man of the same weight. And since alcohol does not diffuse as

rapidly into body fat, the concentration of alcohol in a woman's blood will be higher, even if she drinks the same amount as a man. Also, many women's reactions to alcohol vary throughout the menstrual cycle. It seems that a woman will often be more affected by alcohol right before the beginning of her period. Since alcohol may affect you more profoundly at your menstrual period, you may want to adjust your drinking patterns to avoid negative reactions.

What about drinking when you are pregnant?

You run the risk of permanently harming your baby if you drink while pregnant. This risk increases the more you drink; and, mothers who drink heavily during their pregnancy may have babies with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. These babies may be mentally retarded and may have deformities of the face, heart, and limbs. In addition, at lower levels of drinking, some researchers have shown a higher risk of decreased birthweight, and even of miscarriage. Since no one knows for sure when or at what level of drinks harm may occur, the Surgeon General of the United States has recommended that women not drink at all during pregnancy.

What happens if you drink when you're taking another drug?

When combined with drugs, including over-the-counter medications, alcohol can have a multiplying effect that is unpredictable and dangerous. Even drugs prescribed by doctors may be dangerous when mixed with alcohol. If you are taking any drugs, even a simple cold remedy, sometimes just one drink will make you unexpectedly drowsy or will interfere dangerously with your ability to drive or operate machinery. You may not even be aware of how seriously your judgment is being affected. The potential danger increases when alcohol is mixed with certain drugs, such as the barbiturates used in many sleeping pills. This combination can result in coma or death.

Moreover, it appears that medications containing estrogen, such as birth control pills or "hormone" pills, will affect how a woman's body reacts to alcohol. If you take medications containing estrogen, you may not recover as quickly from the effects of drinking. The best course of action is to check with your physician or pharmacist and to read the label before using alcohol with any other drug.

What if you smoke and drink?

As with other drugs, the combination of drinking and smoking increases the risk of harm to your health. For instance, heavy drinking and smoking greatly increases the risk of cancer of the throat and mouth.

MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT ALCOHOL

Can your drinking affect your children's decisions about drinking?

Yes. Of all the factors influencing drinking decisions, family example is among the strongest and most important. When you drink, think of seeing your drinking pattern in a mirror—what you do will influence what your children will do. If you are a parent who examines her own drinking behavior and demonstrates healthy and informed choices about alcohol, you have the best chance of providing your children with a solid basis for future decisionmaking about alcohol.

What if you have a friend who drinks too much?

Excessive drinking, whether done frequently or during occasional "binges," may indicate a potential problem. If you are concerned about a friend's drinking habits, you can help by giving her support and encouragement to change.

If she depends on alcohol to the extent that she cannot meet home or work responsibilities, neglects her health, or has hurt herself or others while drinking, she probably can't stop drinking by herself and may need professional help. Ignoring her problem or simply expressing sympathy won't help. You *can* help by clearly stating your recognition of her problem, your concern, and the availability of help. Do not try to solve her problem yourself. To find out more about where she can get professional help, contact your family physician or other health care professional, community health center, local hospital, Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, local office of the National Council on Alcoholism, or Women for Sobriety group. Telephone numbers are generally available in your

telephone directory for local groups, or look under State or municipal government listings for alcoholism or health.

If you are concerned about the drinking of a male friend or mate, the same suggestions apply. Early care and confrontation are important, but don't try to solve his problem yourself. Seek out resources in your community to help.

When is it OK to say no to a drink?

Anytime. Although information about alcohol and women's health is important, what really counts is what you decide to do with it. Only you can choose when, where, and how you drink. As you examine the choices available to you, you may find that you will feel better about yourself if *you* choose when and how you drink, rather than letting others or the situation influence you. Remember, it's always OK to say no—the choice is yours. Here's to your health!

For further information, write or call:

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